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ZNR UUUUU ZZH ZDK (CCY - 506A)
O 232230Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY QUITO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3938
INFO RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 5504
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 1661
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ MAR 9753
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 0467
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL PRIORITY 0181
RHMFISS/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY

UNCLAS QUITO 000725

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SENSITIVE

C O R R E C T E D COPY - PARA NUMBERING

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [EC](#)

SUBJECT: ECUADORIAN PROTESTS: ROADS CLEAR, FUTURE CLOUDY

REF: A. QUITO 694

[B](#). QUITO 708

[C](#). QUITO 712

[1](#). (U) Summary: The state of emergency declared in five of Ecuador's 22 provinces has permitted the GOE to clear road blockages in all but the north-central province of Imbabura, where protesters continue to return obstacles to the street as fast as authorities can clear them. Some clashes between protesters and authorities are being reported, possibly including injuries. The Catholic Church has offered to mediate between the government and indigenous demands, and has delivered a petition from the indigenous which awaits a GOE response. In a disturbing new development, three anti-FTA pamphlet bombs reportedly exploded in Cuenca. End Summary.

GOE Opens Roads, Meeting Some Resistance

[2](#). (U) Ecuador's national police chief told NAS Chief on March 23 that military and police have been working in concert to enforce the state of emergency. Violent clashes between protesters and authorities in north-central Imbabura province, north of Otavalo, were reported around midday on March 23, possibly involving injuries. Earlier the same day, three anti-FTA pamphlet bombs were exploded in Cuenca, Ecuador's third-largest city, without injury. Claiming credit was the Popular Combatants Group (GCP) -- a radical leftist group that has claimed responsibility for such bombs in Quito in the past. The state of emergency in the provinces of Imbabura, Cotopaxi, Chimborazo, Canar and parts of Pichincha imposed curfews from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. and sanctions any actions that impede public services. Farmers in southern provinces of Loja, Zamora Chinchipe and Los Rios, blocked roads on March 22 to demand compensation for crop losses caused by recent flooding, but lifted the blocks on March 23.

[3](#). (U) While the highway blockages have decreased, students and teachers, social groups, union workers and indigenous groups are continuing to conduct peaceful protests in the capital, with a steady stream of small Quito marches scheduled throughout the day March 23. Many indigenous marchers are camped out at Quito's National Politechnic University. On March 22, a group of approximately 2,000 protesters passed outside the Embassy en route to the Ecuadorian Congress. Police dispersed the group, permitting

only 16 leaders to proceed to the lawmakers' headquarters. Most protesters carry banners against the FTA on the eve of what is perceived here as the final round of negotiations in Washington beginning today. Protesters chanted "FTA signed, Palacio Ousted." They insist that the public should ultimately decide the FTA by referendum.

Dialogue Blocked, Church Offers Mediation

¶4. (U) President Palacio told the press on March 22 he opposed a referendum vote on the FTA, saying it was moot until an FTA agreement were reached. Once reached, an FTA would be submitted to Congress, which could consider a referendum at that time. A meeting between indigenous coalition CONAIE and the government scheduled for the afternoon of March 22 did not take place because indigenous leaders reportedly did not show up. Government Minister Felipe Vega spent March 22 meeting with leaders of Congress, the Attorney General and Solicitor General to discuss the government's plans for restoring order.

¶5. (U) The president of the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Bishops offered on March 22 to mediate between protester and the government. CONAIE leader Luis Macas has reportedly asked the Church to convey indigenous FTA concerns to Palacio. CONAIE leaders pledged to suspend or renew road blockages based on the president's response. On March 16, the church had issued a statement calling for the government to hold a referendum on the FTA prior to national elections in October. Some commentators have noted in the local press that, despite 19 months of effort, FTA opponents have not been able to collect the 700,000 signatures required to call a referendum under the constitution.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) The opening of roads in some provinces is encouraging, as is the Church's mediating role, but it remains unclear whether the protests are being overcome. Also unclear is the effect reaching an FTA agreement would have. While some speculate that announcement of an agreement would fan the flames, others believe it would be seen as a fait accompli and help calm the situation. Regardless, the GOE firmly intends to continue FTA negotiations in Washington.
BROWN